

A NEW REALISM (2021)

EXHIBITION TEXT



By Glenn Adamson

Worrying about the nature of reality used to be a job for philosophers. It was a specialist topic, to be interrogated through metaphysics and ontology. Most people – including those who believe the world to be shot through with the divine spirit – have gotten along just fine by trusting their own perceptions. To be or not to be may have been the question. But being itself? That was something you could rely on.

Today is different. One might say that never has truth come more easily to our fingertips: seemingly any fact, even the most esoteric, can be called up at a moment’s notice; we’re swimming in information. Or are we drowning in it? People are increasingly distrustful of the evidence of their own eyes and ears, and for good reason. For the communication technology that furnishes us with all this data takes at least as much than it gives. It’s a sprawling manipulation machine. Pundits warn us of the ever-deeper fakes yet to come, simulations so captivating that we’ll no longer know (or care) whether what we see is “real” or not. Already, at what is presumably an early stage in the development of virtual worlds, stories and images are presented to us constantly filtered, optimized, calculated for effect. And – here’s the important point – we are all aware of that process. Contemporary culture is self-conscious, overdetermined by the dialectic between fact and fiction. We are ever more aware of our elastic relationship with reality; that the premises on which we distinguish truth from falsehood are becoming increasingly individualized. As we pick and choose the information we want to trust, consuming it like any other commodity, we end up creating a sort of epistemological mood board, our own personalized version of the real. There is no villain here, no one pulling the strings. It’s a maze of mirrors, in which there’s no monster to slay, and seemingly, no exit.[1]

All this has been long, long in coming. Fake news was born with the printing press. Perhaps never before, however, have so many been so aware of the contingent nature of their own perspectives. One word for it is relativism, and it’s a curse of biblical proportions: having bitten from this apple of knowledge, we can’t easily re-enter the garden of certainty. The natural consequence is to wonder how we might map the contours of this multilayered reality.

This is where design comes into the picture. For its great potential, as a discipline, is to provide just that kind of definition: to clarify complex circumstances through objects. Things that we can actually grasp. Design, at base, is simply a word for the rigorous processes of sorting, interpretation, decision making, and execution. Against the recent relativism, it is grounded in the conviction that arbitrariness can indeed be overcome through experimentation. Design is a practical discipline, but it does find analogues in philosophy: the Empiricism of figures like John Dewey, who embraced a notion of truth based in ongoing process (as opposed to fixed facts); the ambitious rationalism of the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who sought to overcome the haphazardness of random experience by penetrating to the real nature of objects and their interrelationships. “A true idea,” he wrote, “means nothing other than knowing a thing perfectly, or in the best way.”

As one might expect, designers are confronting the crisis of the real from numerous vantage points. At one end of the spectrum they are taking the plunge into the digital sphere, creating artifacts that can only be experienced virtually. At the other extreme they are dropping out of the matrix entirely, turning to archaic craft techniques as a sort of holding action. In the broad middle, designers are using digital tools to transmute matter in new ways, resulting in a great deal of innovation, often involving an oscillation across different technical repertoires. Yet do these strategies truly come to grips with our frictionless present? Or do they only glide across, or turn away, from the surface of the possible, rather than delving into its substance?

What we need is a new realism. This exhibition aims to explore it. We have included nine participants, who represent a diverse range of perspectives, mediums, and concerns. They share two important traits in common. First, although most were initially trained as fine artists or industrial designers, all are now makers, and intensely so. They take individual responsibility for every aspect of their objects, allowing no intervening mediation – social, technological, or otherwise – into their creative practice. They control the means of production, as the saying goes, and this self-reliance affords them a certain autonomy. Yet none are in any sense traditionalists, treating craft as received wisdom. Their works, often realized through newly invented means, are thoroughly individualist, from their base materiality to their eloquent surfaces. *A New Realism* is an exhibition about process without preconception, about objects found in the act of making.

Second, and in keeping with this approach, our nine participants are exploring subject matter in a very specific way, both subjective and factual. This is the essential formula of realism. The term is usefully distinguished from “naturalism,” which is more to do with verisimilitude: representing what’s seen, as accurately as possible. Realism, by contrast, is a much broader and more complex project, not to do with representation *per se*. It’s rather a matter of registering the material, psychological and political conditions of everyday life, as honestly as possible. Our new realists have no interest in conceptually elusive, open-ended “provocations.” They look things in the face, recording their own experiences and feelings without equivocation. Thus they are realists twice over: once with their hands, once with their heads. Ultimately, it is the interaction between these two creative spheres that creates the possibility of insight. These makers are no different from anyone else, with respect to universal truth; their creativity gives them no superior vantage point. What they can do, however, is materialize their own perspective.

Realism has a powerful history. It seems to emerge at moments of crisis, when academicism and idealism – accepted norms of precedent and propriety – seem inadequate. This occurred at various stages in the development of ancient art, and again during the Counter-Reformation of the seventeenth century, when Baroque painters like Caravaggio and Gentileschi brought a newly unvarnished observation to their scenes of violence and piety. It happened again after the revolutions of 1848, when writers like Flaubert, Zola, Dickens, and Eliot, and painters like Courbet, Manet and Millet, began attending to the real lives of the working class. Courbet’s *Stonebreakers*, painted in 1849, remains an indelible example (though it was destroyed in World War II, when a vehicle carrying it to safety was inadvertently bombed by the Allies). The painting showed two laborers clearing the way for a road, one too young for the work, the other too old. Courbet obscured their faces, perhaps to make them emblematic of a general condition – as undeniable as the rocks they are forced to crack and carry.

A century later, in the years after World War II, the French critic Pierre Restany declared the existence of a “Nouveau Réalisme,” which engaged the designed environment through deconstructed readymades or posters (as in the work of Daniel Spoerri, Arman, César, and Jacques Mahé de la Villeglé). At the same time, in America, Leo Steinberg noticed the emergence of a new “flatbed” aesthetic – his way of describing the chaotic yet sensitive proto-Pop of artists like Robert Rauschenberg, who famously declared, “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. I try to act in that gap between the two.” In Rauschenberg’s “receptor surface[s],” Steinberg wrote, reality was not so much depicted as indexed: “information may be received, printed, impressed—whether coherently or in confusion... the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.”[2]

Flip through this exhibition catalogue, and you’ll see all these previous realisms both reflected and refracted. Our nine realists summon up the Baroque theater of the everyday; Courbet’s emphasis on social conditions; Rauschenberg’s registration of a rich, complex social tapestry. But there’s also much here that is, genuinely, new. To begin with, this show is multi-perspectival, a diversity of voices that implies a radical de-centering of realist operations. It points to a non-competitive and inclusive model of truth-in-the-making, by all kinds of people, looking at one another in both wonderment and dismay.

Relatedly, the nine practitioners in *A New Realism* are noteworthy for the eclecticism of their influences. Even a partial list of these would have to include constructed textiles and quilts, African sculpture, nineteenth-century ceramics, the work of Isamu Noguchi, color field painting, Brutalist architecture, 1960s fiber art, postmodern design, and contemporary poetry. Each of these sources is, of course, a reality unto itself. And this, again, is where design comes into the picture. It bears repeating that not all the participants in our exhibition would necessarily identify as designers *per se*. But all of them do operate somewhere in the vast domain of material culture – those objects, functional and otherwise, that mix freely with people in space, rather than holding themselves loftily apart. There is a certain humility, behind all this work: a presumption that a creative work should not hold itself apart in judgment, but keep company with anyone, anywhere.

Looked at like this, it seems almost obvious that realism’s destiny would eventually embrace the practice of design. After all, this discipline has always inhabited the gap between art and life. Design has always been poised at the intersection of aesthetics and functionality; has always provided the props for our individual, self-constructed narratives. Perhaps only now, when objects in general are defined against a virtual “other,” does this doubleness – the combination of personal subjectivity and concrete objecthood – come to seem like an urgent matter. Makers become our metaphysicians, things our best ontological tools. At time when truth is slip-sliding every which way, design gives us something to hold on to. Reality: check.

[1] “I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist,” Samuel Beckett has Inez say in *No Exit*. “I pat myself just to make sure, but it doesn’t help much.”

[2] Leo Steinberg, “The Flatbed Picture Plane,” lecture, 1968; published in *Other Criteria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). See also Alex Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

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ARTISTS



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